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ABSTRACT

The relationship between the board of education of a public school system and the school superintendent is extremely important to the functioning and progress of the system. First-time Ohio superintendents were surveyed at the end of their first and second years about their perceptions of their relationships with their boards of education (N=58). These superintendents were questioned about: (1) their boards' trust and confidence in them; (2) the nature and extent of communication between the board and superintendent; and (3) the job satisfaction of the superintendents. Ten research questions and the methods used to conduct the survey are described. Discussed are the results, in descriptive and tabulated forms, on the elements of trust and confidence, communication, board policy review, job satisfaction, board-superintendent activities, and job paths. The results include that the superintendents had a more realistic view of the school board, and the superintendents seemed to recognize those things which the board felt were important and those which were not so important. After 2 years in these positions, the superintendents were still happy with their career choice, were not worrying about losing their jobs, and felt that their boards perceived them as competent. (Author/RR)

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Relationships Between Superintendents And Boards of Education: Year Two of a Longitudinal Study

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Abstract

First time Ohio school superintendents were surveyed at the end of their second year about their perceptions of their relationships with their boards of education. Two years ago there were 63 new superintendents in Ohio, and all were surveyed after their first year in this position. Of those 63, 58 responded in the first year of this study. After the second year, questionnaires were sent to the 58 superintendents who responded the first year. These superintendents were questioned about their boards' trust and confidence in them, the nature and extent of the communications between the board and superintendent, and the job satisfaction of the superintendents. Comparisons were made between the data from Year One and the data from Year Two. The results indicated that the superintendent-board relationship seemed to be maturing by the end of the second year, the superintendents had a more realistic view of the school board, and the superintendents seemed to recognize those things which the board felt were important and those which were not so important. Superintendents communicated more with individual board members instead of depending on the board president for the communication. After two years in these positions, the superintendents were still happy with their career choice, were not worrying much about losing their jobs, and felt that their boards perceived them as competent. Social contacts with board members lessened during the second year as the relationship seemed to become more professional.

Relationships Between Superintendents And Boards of Education: Year Two of a Longitudinal Study

Introduction

The relationship between the board of education of a public school system and the school superintendent is extremely important to the functioning and progress of the system. The board and the superintendent must find ways to communicate with each other and develop mutual trust and confidence.

The researchers, with the cooperation of the Buckeye Association of School Administrators (the Ohio association for superintendents), conducted a study of all first year Ohio superintendents to examine their perceptions of their boards' confidence in them, the means of communication between them, and the job satisfaction after their first year as superintendents. The next year, these same superintendents were studied at the conclusion of their second year as superintendents.

In a recent article on the dynamics of the superintendent-board relationship, Tallerico (1989) states that little is known about the relationship between school boards and superintendents. Yet, most writers of educational administration would agree about the "...importance of effective superintendent-school board relationships" (Knezevich, 1984, p. 294). Dykes (1965) states, "A community's educational program is in jeopardy if its board and superintendent are not working together in such a manner as to provide proper leadership for the schools" (p. 103).

One of the areas studied is communications. The American Association of School Administrators (1980) stresses the importance of establishing a good system of communications between boards and superintendents. Freund (1988) also mentions the importance of communications, especially between the superintendent and the board

president, while Wright (1983) emphasizes that the communications must go both ways.

Another area investigated was the trust and confidence of the board in the superintendent. Dykes (1965) states, "What the board does and what it permits the superintendent to do are influenced greatly by the confidence and trust existing between them" (p. 116-117). One aspect examined was the confidence of the board in the superintendent's abilities in the areas of finance, personnel, and curriculum. Awender (1985) mentions that finance and personnel are often dominated by senior members of the board, a circumstance which can affect the board-superintendent relationship.

Purpose of the Study

This study was the beginning of a longitudinal study of Ohio superintendents. The first year's data gave important insights into aspects of the first year Ohio superintendent-board relationship which these researchers think is crucial to both boards and superintendents. This first year relationship, like first impressions, can affect future relationships between the superintendent and board members, and may, in fact, be a good predictor of those future relationships. Because of this, this study examined how boards and superintendents communicated during the first two years and the extent that trust and confidence were present in the relationship.

The purpose of the study was to examine the perceptions of all first time school superintendents in Ohio with respect to their relationships with their boards of education. Specifically, this study examined the relationship of the boards' trust and confidence in the superintendents, the nature and extent of the communications between the superintendents and board members, the job satisfaction of the superintendents, along with some demographic data on the superintendents and their districts.

Research Questions

Below are the research questions investigated:

1. What aspects of the relationships between Ohio boards of education and superintendents do the superintendents perceive as the most important?
2. How do the perceptions in (1) compare to the perceptions of the superintendents with respect to their own boards?
3. What forms of communications do superintendents and boards use? To what extent are they used?
4. Is there any relationship between the superintendents' perception of the boards' trust and confidence in the superintendents and the methods of communication between them?
5. To what extent do boards and superintendents review board policies?
6. Are these superintendents happy with their jobs?
7. What social and professional activities do the superintendents and boards members pursue together?
8. What is the job path to the superintendency?
9. Are there any differences between the responses in Year One and in Year Two?
10. Have any superintendents left their positions during these two years? For what reasons?

Method

The Buckeye Association of School Administrators (BASA: the Ohio state organization for superintendents) supplied a list of all first year Ohio superintendents. There were 63.

At the end of this first year, a questionnaire was sent to all 63 superintendents, asking them questions about their relationships with their boards of education, their activities, their means of communication, and questions for demographic purposes. A stamped, self-addressed return envelope was included with the questionnaire and cover letter from the BASA Executive Director. Phone calls were made to the districts which did not respond.

Of the 63 questionnaires which were mailed, 58 (92.1%) were returned and used in the data base for the first year.

The data collection took place in June, upon the completion of the superintendents' first year as Ohio superintendents. The data analysis occurred during the following academic year. The data were analyzed, using SPSSx and SAS statistical packages. Specifically, the data were subjected to frequency analysis, Pearson correlations, and a program for test scale analysis which was used to estimate scale reliability. A .05 level of confidence was selected to test for statistical significance.

At the end of the second year, questionnaires were sent to the 58 superintendents who responded during the first year of the study. The questionnaire was identical to the first one except that one additional question was added. The same procedures were used to follow up on those who did not respond to the first request for information.

Of the 58 questionnaires which were sent, 48 were returned and used in the data base. This is 82.8% of the total (and 76.2% of the original population).

The analyses of the data were the same as during the first year, using the same statistical packages and same level for statistical significance.

Results and Discussion

This study was designed to examine the perceptions of all second year Ohio superintendents with respect to their relationships with their boards of education.

Trust and Confidence

Table 1 shows what percentage of superintendents rated each item as "extremely important" for all superintendents and all school boards.

Insert Table 1 about here

In comparison with Year One responses, the superintendents' feelings of the importance of Ohio school boards' confidence in the superintendents' handling of fiscal matters increased by 9.2% from the first year while the importance of the superintendents' handling of curriculum decreased 16.7%. The importance of the Ohio board's confidence in the superintendents' handling of personnel matters also decreased, by 18.2%. One explanation might be that the superintendents recognized the importance of financial concerns to the board or saw that the board emphasized fiscal matters in their questioning of the superintendents and their staffs.

The superintendents were then asked to examine the situation in their own districts and tell to what extent their own boards demonstrated trust and confidence in them.

The first year data demonstrated that the superintendents rated "trust" as the most important aspect for superintendent-board relations for Ohio superintendents in general, but they rated their own boards' trust in them as fifth. This lead the researchers to state that these superintendents looked at Ohio boards in general and then at their boards and said, "My board is different. It has different opinions than other boards." The researchers called this the "grass is greener" effect: "Ohio boards feel this way, but my board feels differently." Or, "I have special problems with my board."

The data from the second year rank "trust" first for all Ohio superintendents/boards, and rank it third, up from fifth last year, for the superintendents' own boards. However, the rise in rank is not due to an increase in how the superintendents perceive their boards' opinions of them with regard to "trust." In fact, there was a slight decrease in this factor (down 1.7%). "Trust" increased in rank because there was a larger decrease in the ratings given to the other factors: the boards' confidence in them in the two areas of curriculum and personnel.

The superintendents' feelings of the extent of Ohio school boards' confidence in superintendents in general decreased in three areas from the first year to the second year of

the study: "trust" decreased by 12.6%, curriculum handling by 6.8%, and handling of personnel matters by 14%. (Fiscal matters were about the same---down 0.9%). Perhaps these overall decreases reflect a more realistic attitude of superintendents towards school boards in general as a result of their two years experience and as a result of hearing "war stories" from other superintendents during those two years.

Communications

Table 2 shows the extent to which the responding superintendents and board members communicated and how they communicated, as perceived by the superintendents.

Insert Table 2 about here

Some conclusions can be drawn from the data, as compared with first year data.

---The superintendents phoned their board presidents more than the presidents phoned them, and in the second year, this difference increased: 65.6% of the first year superintendents phoned the president at least weekly verses 60.3% of the presidents phoning the superintendents. In the second year, the respective figures were 68.8% and 58.4%.

---There was an increase in board members coming to the superintendents' offices in the second year (up 9.5%) and a decrease in taking board members to a business lunch (down 9.9%). This second figure reflects the overall reduction of "social" activities which is detailed in a later section.

---The superintendents communicated with board members by telephone more often than in the superintendents' offices. However, the difference between these two means of communications decreased the second year. Written communication, the most utilized

means of communication between the board and the superintendent, remained at about the same high level as in the first year.

In the second year, the superintendents tended to phone the board presidents more often than the presidents phone them, and as stated earlier, this difference increased. On the other hand, individual board members began to visit the superintendents in their offices more during the second year to communicate with the superintendent. Thus, the pattern of communication established the first year: superintendent to board president to individual board members changed somewhat. In the second year, the superintendent still communicated directly with the president, but there were more direct superintendent-to-board member communications the second year.

In looking at correlations between the board's perception of the superintendent as being competent and the type or extent of communication between the superintendent and the board members, it was found that there was no significant relationship between these factors.

Board Policy Review

Since establishing board policy is one of the major functions of a board of education, the superintendents were asked whether the boards and the superintendents together routinely reviewed the individual policies in the board policy manual.

The number of boards which routinely reviewed board policy increased by 10.8% from the first year to the second year of the study. Also, there was a 9.9% increase in the number of boards which placed "Board Policy" on the board agenda as a permanent item for all board meetings. These increases may indicate that the superintendents recognized that having written board policies as a regular part of the board discussion gives direction to both the board and to the superintendents. It also gives the board some "rules to live by" which can be helpful to the superintendent as well as to the board.

Job Satisfaction

After the first year of the study, 50% of the superintendents stated that they were "very happy" were their jobs with another 41.4% saying they were "mostly" happy. After the second year, the figures were somewhat reversed: 41.7% "very happy" and 50% "mostly" happy. While this is a slight decrease in satisfaction, over 90% still find the job quite satisfactory. It should be kept in mind that there were five superintendents who left their positions and did not have a chance to respond. They might well have rated their job satisfaction lower than those who stayed and responded. (These five will be discussed briefly in a later section.)

The board's perception of the superintendent as being competent correlated significantly with job satisfaction and with worrying about losing their jobs. That is, those superintendents who perceived that their boards felt that they were competent superintendents were highly satisfied with their jobs and did not worry about losing their jobs.

Insert Table 3 about here

Board-Superintendent Activities

There has often been a debate about whether superintendents should attend social functions with board members. As a result, the superintendents were asked whether they did attend specific activities with board members.

In comparing the second year results with the first year data, the superintendents had less contact with board members in social situations the second year. Superintendents and board members went to a bar or lounge 12.6% less the second year and met socially after a board meeting 8.7% less than they did the year before. Also, they went to restaurants together 5.2% less than before. This decrease in social activities may be due to the fact that

first year superintendents tend to take every opportunity to learn to know board members and that board members invite out superintendents for the same reason. Perhaps this was accomplished during the first year and a more professional relationship developed the second year.

Job Path

During both years of the study, the superintendents were asked what position they held before assuming this first superintendency. Of course, the responses are the same for an individual superintendent both years. The only difference is that some superintendents left their positions after the second year and could not respond. The responses the first year indicated that over 55% of the superintendents were either assistant/associate superintendents or high school principals just prior to their appointment as a superintendent. The second year data---from those still in the same position---strengthened this concept. Over 60% of the second year responding superintendents reported the prior position as assistant/associate superintendent or high school principal. Both of these statistics are consistent with other research in this area. Also, this demonstrates that the prior experience of this population of superintendents is similar to that of other superintendents polled in other research.

Other Findings

Below are some of the results obtained from some specific, individual questions asked of the superintendents:

Inservice: Superintendents were asked whether they provided inservice training for their newly elected board members. There was an increase in this training by 33.9% over the previous year, probably due to an election during this time period. (There was a 48.4% decrease in "There have not been any new board members)

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Chain of Command: Superintendents usually hope that boards of education encourage staff members and citizens to "follow the chain of command" and not try to answer their questions and solve their problems without involving the administration in the process. Results indicated an increase in the boards making people follow the chain of command by 12.1% over the first year, perhaps reflecting the boards' overall increase in respect for the superintendent and confidence in the superintendent as he/she gains experience. (The superintendents' perception of the boards' respect for them increased 9.9% over the first year.)

Strengths of the Superintendent: The superintendents were asked about their perceptions of the boards' feelings of the superintendents' strengths: finance, curriculum and instruction, buildings and grounds. As compared with the first year, there was a 10.2% increase in "finance and curriculum/instruction." It is interesting to note that no superintendent in either year listed "buildings and grounds" as the main strength (as seen by boards or by the superintendent), even though boards often spend as much or more time discussing and debating these areas than they do the areas of finance and curriculum.

Civic Organizations: Boards often want their superintendents to become part of the community by joining local civic and community organizations. Superintendents were asked whether their boards were encouraging them to participate in this way. In the second year of the study, there was an increase of 12.6% in the number of boards which encouraged their superintendents to join such organizations.

Evaluation: Since Ohio requires evaluation of the superintendent by state law, superintendents were asked whether they had, in fact, been evaluated. After the first year, 29.3% stated that they had not been evaluated. However, it may have been that some

evaluations took place after the questionnaires were answered. The second year data show that only 6.3% of the superintendents had not been evaluated after two years. Thus, most boards seemed to be in compliance with the law with respect to evaluation.

Summary Question: A question was added to the second year questionnaire. It asked the superintendents to tell how important five items were for a good relationship between them and their boards. "My board's confidence in me" was listed by 85.4% as extremely important for good relations. The second highest percentage was "communications between the board and me" (77.1%), followed by an "appropriate role definition for the board and for the superintendent" and "the importance of board confidence in superintendents in Ohio" (62.5% each). The last item was shared "activities between the board and me" with only 31.7%, much lower than the other items. This supports the idea that there was a decrease in the superintendent/board social activities in the second year.

Non-Respondents

There were ten fewer responding superintendents in the second year than in the first year. An attempt was made to find out something about these ten people. Five of the superintendents were still in their same positions but chose not to respond to the second questionnaire, even with reminders and phone calls. The other five superintendents had left their positions. In these cases, the new superintendents returned the questionnaires stating that the person was no longer with the district. (It was important that the same people fill out the second year questionnaires as filled out the first year ones, so the new superintendents were instructed to write on the cover letter that they were new and return the letter to the researchers.)

Phone calls were made to the superintendents' secretaries in the five districts where the superintendents had left, asking the secretaries to describe the conditions under which they had left. Two of the five left because the board did not want them to remain as

superintendent in the district, two left for promotions (and with good relations with the former board), and one left for an reason which the researchers could not discover. All five were males.

Summary

There appeared to be a maturing of the board-superintendent relationships by the end of the second year in the same district. The superintendents had a more realistic attitude towards school boards in general as they perceived the Ohio boards' confidence in other superintendents lower than the previous year. The superintendents seemed to recognize those things which the board felt were important and those which were less important during this time, possibly because they had more occasions to communicate individually with board members instead of through the president of the board. The superintendents were still happy with their jobs, not worrying very much about losing them, and they felt that their boards perceived them as being competent. While the superintendents and boards had more individual contacts the second year, they also had fewer social contacts with the board. The relationship seemed to become more professional after two years. The superintendents felt that their boards respected them and made people follow the chain of command. The vast majority of the superintendents were still in the same position after two years.

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Table 1

Relationships Between Boards and Superintendents Described As "Extremely Important" By Superintendents

Relationships	Percent
The board's trust in the superintendent	95.8
The board's perception of the superintendent as being competent	91.7
The board's confidence in the superintendent's handling of fiscal matters	83.3
The board's respect for the superintendent	79.2
The board's confidence in the superintendent's handling of personnel matters	64.6
The board's confidence in the superintendent's handling of curriculum matters	33.3

Note. The percent indicates those marking "5" ("Extremely Important") on a 1-5 scale.

Table 2

The Extent To Which Superintendents and Their Boards Communicate "Almost Daily," "Several Times A Week," Or "Almost Weekly" As Described By Superintendents

Forms of Communication	Percent
I send the board written information besides board meeting information	70.9
I phone the board president	68.8
The board president phones me	58.4
I phone board members	37.6
Board members phone me	35.4
Board members come to my office	25.0
I go to board members' houses or businesses	4.2
I take board member(s) to lunch	2.1

Note. The percent indicates those marking "5" ("Almost Daily"), "4" ("Several Times A Week"), or "3" ("Almost Weekly") on a 1-5 scale.

Table 3

Correlation Between Board's Perception Of Superintendent As Being Competent (In Opinion Of Superintendent) And the Superintendent's Job Satisfaction

Relationship	Pearson r	Significance
Board's perception of superintendent as competent and the superintendent's happiness with career choice	-.4830	S
Board's perception of superintendent as competent and the superintendent's worrying about loss of job	.4162	S

Note. A "5" on a 1-5 scale for competence means "Demonstrates This All the Time."
A "1" on a 1-4 scale for job happiness means "Very much."
A "1" on a 1-3 scale for worrying about loss of job means "A Lot."
These were significant at the .01 level as well as at the .05 level.